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THE DESERTED MEDIEVAL SETTLEMENT AT (?)BARROW, ODCOMBE, SOMERSET: TRIAL EXCAVATIONS IN 2014

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(*with contributions by* Berni Seddon[2], Kevin Hayward[2], Don O'Meara[3] *and* Kevin Rielly[2])

Introduction

A group of earthworks in the parish of Odcombe, Somerset (ST508173) were first identified as the well-preserved remnants of a deserted medieval settlement in 1971 (Aston 1977, 115; Pearson 1978) (Fig. 1). Aerial photographs and a sketch plan provided by the late Mick Aston showed a number of house platforms surrounded by a curving holloway that linked the settlement to the local road system. Diligent research revealed that the location was possibly a small hamlet named 'Barrow', mentioned in fourteenth-century documents (Aston 1977, 115).

As a well-preserved example of a small medieval rural settlement Barrow deserved to be scheduled as an ancient monument. Alas, fate had different notions and in 1976 the landowner bulldozed the site flat as part of a series of agricultural improvements. Pottery recovered during this unfortunate event was of the tenth to fourteenth centuries (Pearson 1978). The pre-Norman sherds were of some significance as this material is comparatively rare in the region. In February 1979 the site was described as 'wrecked' (SOM HER 54371) and archaeological interest, with the exception of a small investigation as part of the Ilchester to Odcombe water pipeline (Wessex Archaeology 1992, fig. 6), waned.

Figure 1 Site location map. Drawn by Andrew Agate.

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In 2009 a landscape project was begun with the assistance of the South Somerset Archaeological Research Group and the Yeovil Archaeological and Local History Society to investigate the hinterland of the late Roman villa at Lufton, which lies a little less than a kilometre north-east of Barrow. One of the aims of this project is to shed light on the transition from the Roman period to the early Middle Ages. Barrow offered an opportunity to explore a badly damaged site and one which had produced evidence of pre-Norman activity. It was hoped that any excavation might be able to identify surviving early medieval features. The authors were also cognizant that the western expansion of Yeovil threatens this landscape and excavation would, at least, prove whether any archaeological deposits survived the 1976 bulldozing and subsequent mechanised agriculture.

Preliminary evaluation of the site was undertaken for the project by GeoFlo who carried out a 2ha fluxgate gradiometer survey over the site in December 2013 (partially funded by the MSRG). This survey identified various pipelines and other modern features (Caldwell 2014). Additionally there were a number of faint anomalies that might have archaeological origins. The most obvious and convincing of these was a curvilinear anomaly considered as potentially representing the infilled holloway running around the settlement. Beyond this, the geophysics seemed to show little promise.

The excavations

The geophysics, aerial photography and the sketch plan were rectified in GIS allowing us to target two trenches over areas of interest (Fig. 2). The first of these (Trench A) was positioned over what, from the aerial photographs and earthwork plan, ought to have been the location of a house platform. Trench B was located to assess the curvilinear geophysical anomaly that we hoped would be the infilled perimeter holloway.

The excavations took place over three weeks in late July 2014. The excavation team was primarily drawn from Newcastle University undergraduate students assisted by members of the South Somerset Archaeological Research Group under the supervision of the authors. The weather, which was extremely hot and very dry for the duration of the excavation, made for arduous working conditions. The clays of the site baked hard and in some cases it was very difficult to determine context boundaries and edges.

Trench A

Trench A was 10m square and the ploughsoil was removed by machine. The only feature of archaeological note was a large irregular pit in the south-east corner of the trench [007] (Figs. 3 and 4). This feature had an irregular base, which, even in high summer, just penetrated the water table. Its primary fill was a firm blueish-grey silty clay containing no finds. The secondary fill was a firm dark

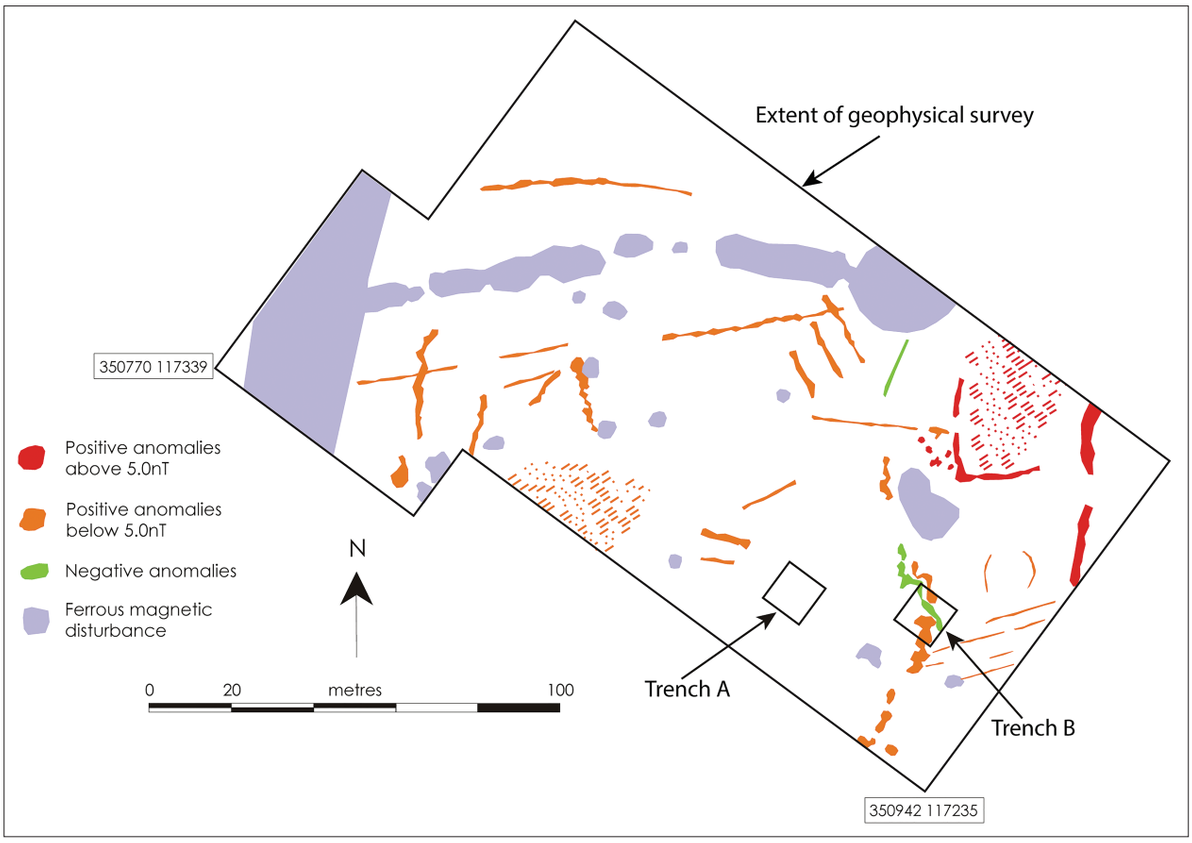

Figure 2 Geophysical interpretation. Drawn by Andrew Agate, after Caldwell, 2014.

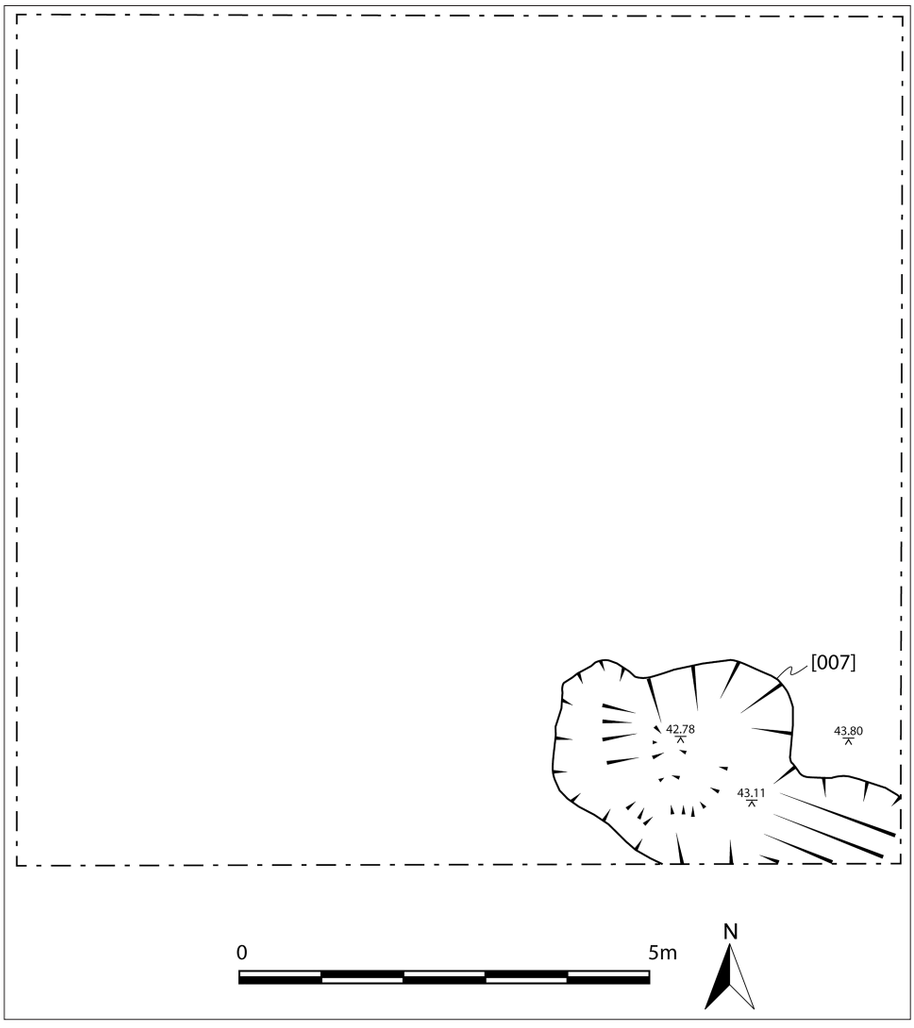

Figure 3 Trench A: medieval features. Drawn by Andrew Agate.

Figure 4 Pit [007] fully excavated and looking west. Photo: Andrew Agate.

grey silty clay containing 131 sherds of medieval pottery spot-dated to 1250-1300 and a fragment of a Pennant Sandstone whetstone (Figs. 11.1–2 and 11.4). Fifty five fragments of animal bone were recovered by hand with a further eighteen recovered from a sieved bulk sample. The overwhelming majority of these bones were cattle or cattle sized but sheep/goat, horse and chicken were also present.

Trench B

Trench B was a rectangular trench measuring 11m × 13m and the ploughsoil was removed by machine (Figs. 5 and 6). Archaeological features and deposits survived to a far greater extent than in Trench A and a more complex stratigraphic sequence of five phases was identified.

The earliest activity was a cut feature, probably a ditch, partially investigated in the centre of the trench [137] (Figs. 5 and 6). This feature was filled with a very moist dark grey silty clay [123] (Fig. 7). On excavation, traces of what appeared to be a small tree branch were seen and this suggests the possibility of organic preservation in the base of the valley. Finds were sparse but included a single, probably Middle Iron Age, sherd, some struck and burnt flint and three poorly preserved fragments of cattle and sheep sized animal bone. There were also three fragments of a light green medium grained igneous rock, with white feldspar laths. None of the sources for this rock are local to the Yeovil area and an origin in the dyke intrusions at Cheddon-Fitzpaine, 20km to the north west near Taunton (Edmonds and Williams 1985, 47) or further away in Devon (40km), where there are Early Permian intrusions and Volcanics from the Exeter Volcanic Series is likely (Edwards and Scrivener 1999). Dr Kevin Hayward, who identified these fragments, suggests that they may have been derived from a prehistoric saddle quern.

Sealing this prehistoric feature and covering the eastern side of the trench was a hard, dark brownish red layer of gravelly sandy silt 0.4m thick [105] (Fig. 7). Both in terms of consistency and colour this deposit

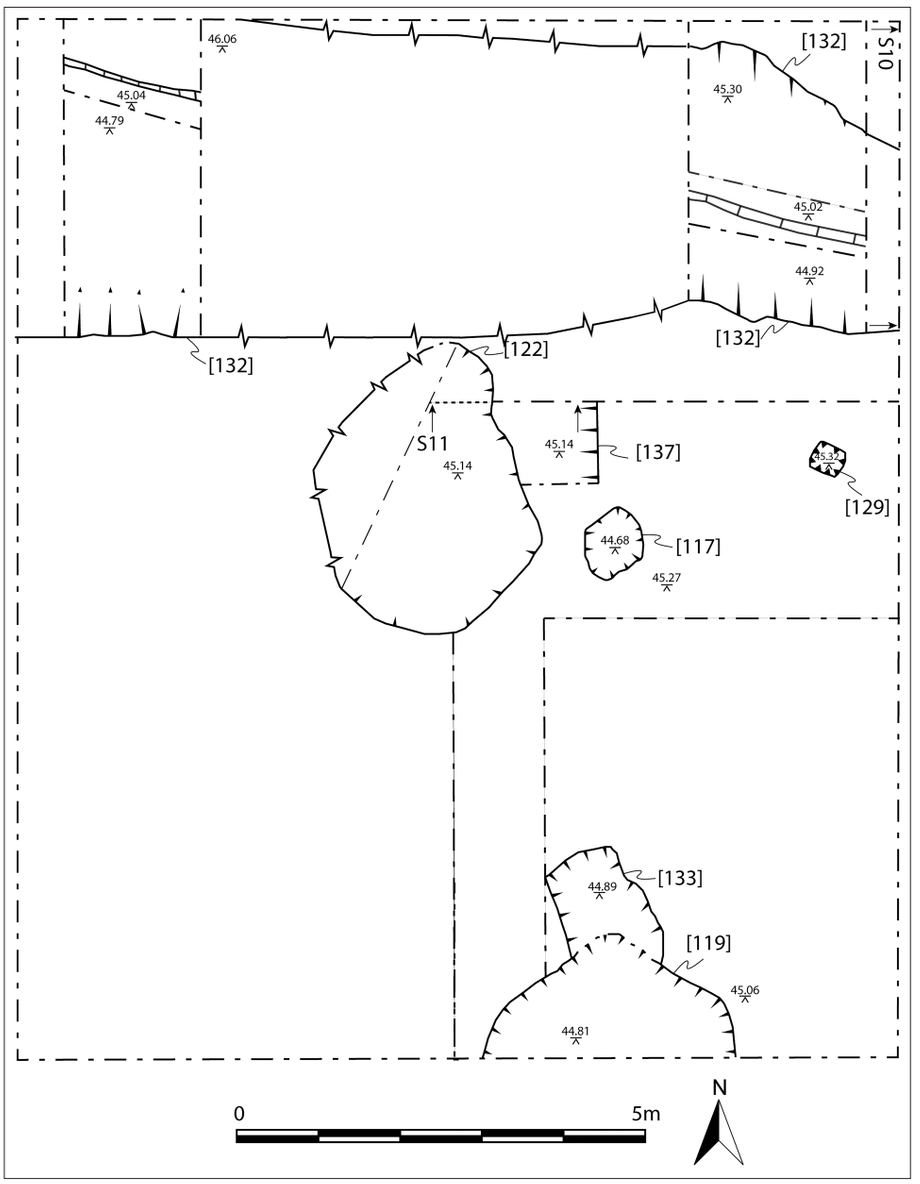

Figure 5 Trench B: all features. Drawn by Andrew Agate.

Figure 6 Trench B looking north: end of excavation. Photo: Andrew Agate.

was unlike any other identified on the site. It was only possible to partially investigate this layer and it yielded a single rim sherd from a Romano-British BB1 jar of probable second to fourth-century date.

Cutting into the brownish red deposit were a number of features that are of medieval date (Fig. 5). In the south east corner of the trench four shallow pits, two of which intercut, were identified. The earliest [133] of the two intercutting pits contained five fragments of cattle bone and nineteen pottery sherds dated 1050–1200. The later pit [119] contained a larger assemblage of forty-four sherds similarly spot dated to 1050–1200 and a single goat/sheep molar. The remaining pits both contained residual struck flint.

The most important feature was a substantial ditch that ran along the northern edge of the trench [132] (Figs. 5, 6, 8 and 9). This ditch was investigated at its western and eastern end and proved to be *c*. 3.5m wide and *c*. 0.8m deep. In the western slot the lowest fill was a discrete orangey-reddish grey silty clay containing no finds [110]. Over this deposit was a dark grey clay 0.3m thick with some charcoal and hamstone inclusions [104]. This deposit was also encountered in the eastern slot (Fig. 9, [130]). Together these fills

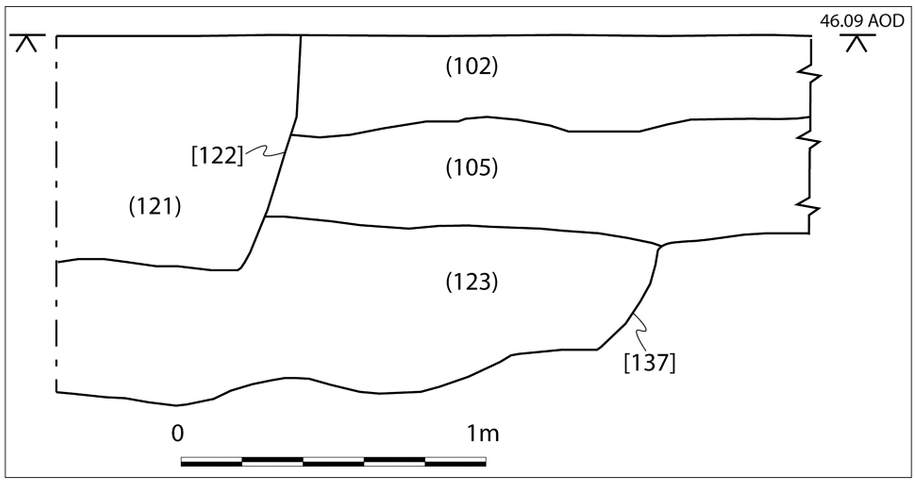

Figure 7 Trench B: south facing section across [137] and [105]. Drawn by Andrew Agate.

Figure 8 Ditch [132] (western slot, facing north). Note lower fill [104] left in situ beneath the field drain and upper fill [103], sealed by old turf line [106] in section. A layer interpreted as the final infill of this feature [102] overlies [109] at the base of the plough zone. Photo: Andrew Agate.

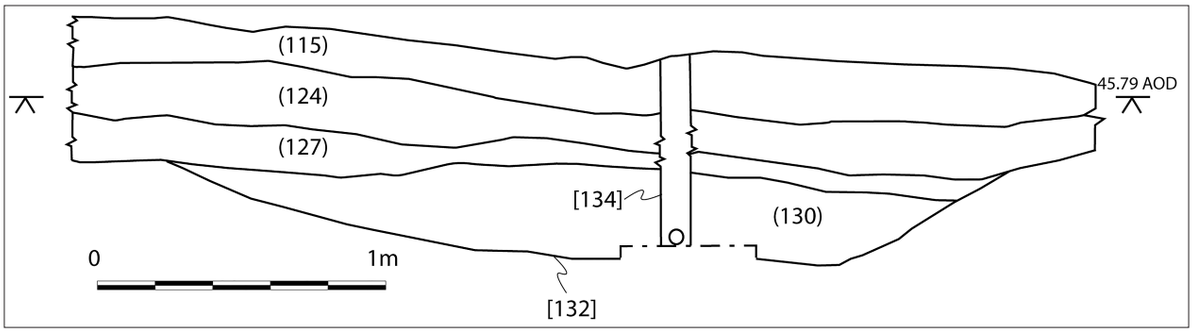

Figure 9 West facing section across ditch [132] in the eastern slot. Drawn by Andrew Agate.

contained eighteen sherds of medieval pottery spot-dated to 1175–1300 (Fig. 11.3) and six poorly preserved fragments of cow and sheep/goat bone. Of greater note, were 2122g of iron smithing slag. This included six smithing hearth bases. Two of these were plano-convex in shape, two were amorphous and one was an atypical sub-rectangular form. Overlying these early fills was another deposit identified in both slots ([103], Fig. 9, [127]). Approximately 0.2m thick it contained thirteen sherds spot dated to 1175–1300, single fragments of cow and horse bone and 630g of iron smithing slag, including one piece of furnace lining.

The cutting of the ditch and its subsequent infilling are likely to be contemporary with the habitation of the settlement and, perhaps, an unknown period of time following its abandonment. The sequence of silting in the ditch was brought to an end in the western slot by an dark grey silty clay without inclusions that was very apparent in section [106]. This deposit is likely to represent a stable turf line. In the eastern slot a dark yellowish brown clayey silt with some burnt stone inclusions occupied approximately the same stratigraphic position as the presumed turf line (Fig. 9, [124]). Post-medieval field-drains utilising ceramic pipes a foot in length were probably cut through these deposits (the cuts were extremely difficult to identify either in section or plan) to the base of the ditch (Fig. 9, [134]).

Finally, the ditch was infilled by a series of deposits of brownish grey silty clay [102] and [115], sealed in the east by a spread of yellow clay ([109], not illustrated).

These deposits contained 3190g of smithing slag, some animal bone, 308 sherds of pottery (including a post-medieval sherd), an elongate whetstone, perhaps from the Forest of Dean or South Wales, and an incomplete kiln brick stamped …WN CLA…. This may be a product of the Crown Clay Company in Bristol, who operated between 1880 and 1887. All of these deposits are interpreted as the product of the bulldozing that took place in 1976.

The finds

Brief summaries of the pottery, bone and slag assemblages are provided here. More information can be found in the site archive and Somerset HER (32919).

The seal matrix

Three metres south of the south western corner of Trench B a copper-alloy seal matrix was found in the ploughsoil by Mr Mike Charles, a volunteer metal detectorist (Fig. 10). This is the most important small find and it is unfortunate that this object was unstratified.

The pendant seal matrix depicts a hare riding a hound and is surrounded by a gothic legend in retrograde that reads 'Sohov Roben' ('Tallyho Robin'). Seal matrices depicting similar scenes are well known and examples from Alvediston, Wilts. (Sohov Robin SOM-9E74EA); Binbrook, E. Lincs. (Sohov Rogen NLM-CB2BA7) and Holme Lacy, Here. (Sodov Robin HESH-690900) are close parallels. The object probably dates to between 1250 and 1400 and, given its iconography, might be best interpreted as an ironic castigation of the elite's love of hunting. Seals were an important aspect of identity in medieval society (Bedos-Rezak 2008) and this object suggests that a literate individual at the least visited the site and more probably lived in the settlement.

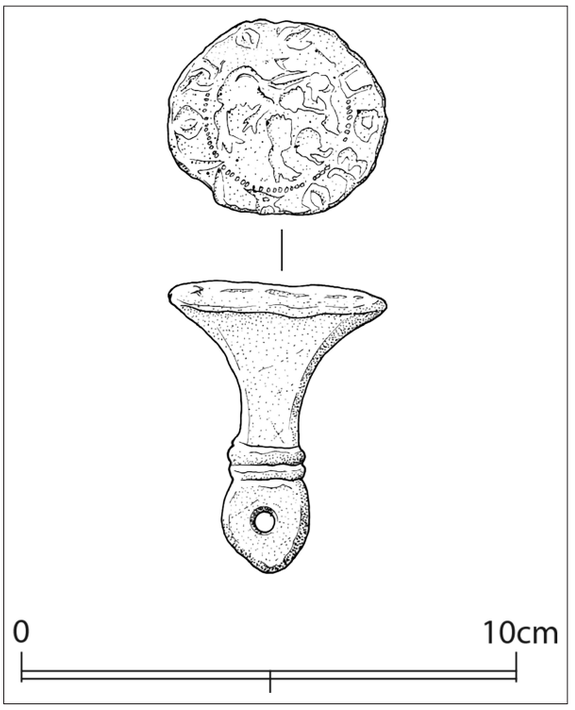

Figure 10 Medieval seal matrix. Drawn by Mark Hoyle.

The pottery (Berni Seddon)

The assemblage amounts to 605 sherds, weighing 4547g. The majority dates from the late eleventh to thirteenth centuries, although a single nineteenth-century sherd was also recovered. The condition is variable, with an average sherd weight of 7g.

The pottery from the site has been identified and catalogued by sherd count and weight. The fabrics were examined under ×20 magnification and recorded where possible using the coding system devised for nearby Ilchester (Pearson 1982). Where no firm attribution could be made, primarily for the glazed wares, provisional mnemonic codes were assigned and brief descriptions of the fabrics are available in Table 1. All analysis followed the Medieval Pottery Research Group's standards (MPRG 1998, 2001).

Over 80% of the pottery recovered from site is comprised of the distinctive and regionally ubiquitous flint and chert-tempered coarseware produced in the Blackdown Hills spanning the border between Somerset and Devon. The majority of this material occurs in the coarser variant described by Pearson, Type B (Group 16), with a smaller quantity of Type BB (Group 18), the latter being finer and containing fewer large grits. These distinction are now considered to be simply gradations in a range rather than distinct fabrics (Allan *et al*. 2011, 169).

In keeping with Ilchester, jars comprise the most common form for Type B and BB with one possible stamp decorated storage jar or pitcher and a single bowl. The rims are also typical, relatively simple in form being folded, thickened or beaded with rounded, flat or bevelled tops in differing combinations. Two Type BB sherds demonstrate segmented circle stamps, a type not evident in the published Ilchester material. A small number of sherds have been provisionally identified as Type B3 and a single sand tempered local coarseware (MCW1), probably equating to Pearson's Group 22 of late 13th to 14th century date, was also recorded.

The glazed wares, represented as jugs, remain unsourced but probably equate to Pearson's Groups 19 and 20, originating from beyond the county in Wiltshire and the Bristol area. Numerically the most common type was UPG3, although this is inflated by a large number of sherds from a single jug. UPG3 is characterised by a pale to dark grey fabric containing moderate to abundant quartz sand and blackened stains and voids, possibly from burnt out organics. The greatest number of jugs, however, occur as UPG1, a distinctive very fine sandy fabric containing moderate black iron ore. Decoration includes simple green glaze, combing, iron-rich slip painting and applied iron-rich painted strips and pads.

The animal bones (Kevin Rielly)

The bone was recorded to species/taxonomic category where possible and to size class in the case of unidentifiable bones such as ribs, fragments of longbone shaft and the majority of vertebra fragments. Recording followed the established techniques whereby details of the element, species, bone portion, state of fusion, wear of the dentition, anatomical measurements

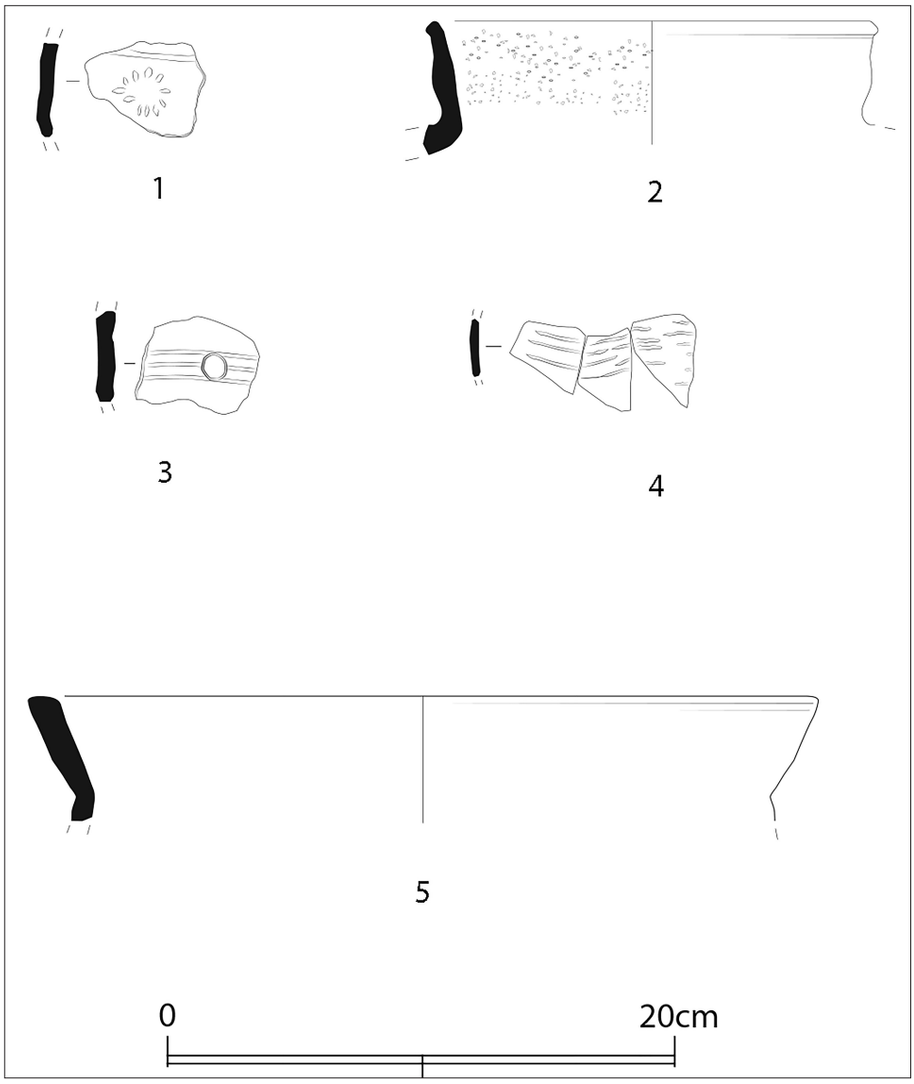

Figure 10 (1) ILLB, body sherds with segmented circle stamp: AD1050–1200. Fill of [007]. (2) ILLB, large jar: AD1050–1200. Fill of [007]. (3) UPG6, jug body sherd, incised horizontal lines and applied iron rich painted pads and slip lines: AD1175–1300. Fill [104] of [132]. (4) UPG2, body sherds from a green glazed jug with multiple incised diagonal lines: AD. Fill of [007]. (5) ILLB, rim sherd from a jar AD1050–1200. Layer [102]. Drawn by Mark Hoyle.

Table 1 The pottery types. SC = Sherd count. Weight in grams.

Fabric code	Expansion	Forms	SC	Weight	Date range	
ILLA	Ilchester Type A	-	1	14	900	1100
ILLB	Ilchester Type B	Jar, bowl, storage jar/ pitcher	464	3492	1050	1200+
ILLB3	Ilchester Type B3	Jar	4	49	1100	1300
ILLBB	Ilchester Type BB	Jar	22	123	1150	1300
MCW1	Medieval coarseware 1		1	58	1250	1400
UPG1	Unprovenanced glazed ware 1	Jug	28	233	1175	1300
UPG2	Unprovenanced glazed ware 2	Jug	13	59	1175	1300
UPG3	Unprovenanced glazed ware 3	Jug, jug/pitcher	54	410	1175	1300
UPG4	Unprovenanced glazed ware 4	Jug	1	7	1175	1300
UPG5	Unprovenanced glazed ware 5	Jug	2	23	1175	1300
UPG6	Unprovenanced glazed ware 6	Jug	12	49	1175	1300
UPG7	Unprovenanced glazed ware 7	Jug	1	16	1175	1300
BONE	Bone china		1	7	1794	1900

Table 2 Count of hand collected and sieved (in brackets) animal bones divided by Phase and trench.

Phase:	Prehistoric	Medieval		Modern	
Trench:	B	A	B	A	B
Cattle	2	6(2)	10	3	
Equid		1	1		1
Cattle-size		43(15)	3	2	
Sheep/Goat	1	5	2		
Sheep-size				2	
Chicken		(1)			
Grand Total	3	55(18)	16	7	1

and taphonomy including natural and anthropogenic modifications to the bone were registered. The sample collections were washed through a modified Siraf tank using a 1mm mesh and the subsequent residues were air dried and sorted.

The site provided a hand-recovered total of 82 bones with a further 18 fragments from the single sample. They are generally in a moderate to poor state of preservation and highly fragmented. Table 2 divides this collection by period, trench, species and method of recovery.

The archaeometallurgical residues (Don O'Meara)

The excavations produced just under 6kg of material which can broadly be described as metallurgical wastes and residues. Analysis followed the standard recommendations for the examination of material of archaeometallurgical significance (Bachmann 1982, 3–4; Bayley *et al*. 2001, 7).

The material recovered here represents a typical assemblage of iron-smithing evidence, as might be found on any early medieval site (Bayley 2001, 3). The assemblage is too small to discuss the significance of iron-working at this site in a detailed manner; however, some initial remarks can be made.

The evidence suggest that secondary smithing was taking place at this site; *i.e*. the making, or repair, of iron objects from consolidated bar iron as opposed to the smelting of ore, or the primary working of unconsolidated iron bloom material. Specifically, tap slag was not identified, which would be typical of smelting operations. This was determined both by the surface morphology of the material, and the generally small and uniform vesicle sizes. The smithing hearth bases are formed by the reaction of iron scale, silica and the clay lining which form the base of the smithing hearth, and are common finds from medieval sites (Starley and Dennis 1999, 2) (Table 3). The volume of material recovered at this stage does not suggest very extensive metal-working, though as this material is not likely to be transported for long distances it suggests that the iron-working was taking place within the immediate area of the excavation.

Table 3 Measurable smithing hearth bases.

Context	**Max**	**Min**	**Thickness**	**Weight (g)**
102	11.3	7.3	4.6	294
102	7.9	7.3	3.7	405
102	11.4	6.3	3.4	385
102	6.8	6.6	2.6	171
103	9.8	8.5	3.8	407
104	9.5	8.2	3.5	305
104	7.4	5.3	3.3	181
104	7.6	6.2	3.2	229
104	7.8	3.8	1.9	74
104	7.9	5.8	3.5	211
130	11.3	7.8	4.4	566

Discussion

The excavations successfully established that the deserted medieval settlement had been badly damaged, but not completely destroyed by its flattening in 1976 and subsequent ploughing. The failure of the geophysical survey to detect substantial cut features like the ditch in Trench B is most surprising and has significant implications for development control and heritage management in this locality. The curving anomaly that was identified by the geophysics should have crossed the trench from the north-west to the south-east. No such archaeological feature was observed and we suspect that the magnetic anomaly was produced by the iron smithing slag.

Archaeologically the depth of stratigraphy in Trench B was noteworthy with a sequence including both prehistoric and Roman period deposits. Considerable light has also been shed on the nature of the medieval settlement. No evidence for activity before the Norman Conquest was forthcoming, but the site was clearly occupied during the late eleventh to fourteenth centuries. The inhabitants had access to a range of local and non-local pottery and cattle, sheep, goats, horses and chickens all formed part of the local landscape. Most surprising was the recovery of the seal matrix, which suggests that at least one individual at this small settlement was literate.

The site of (?)Barrow and the little valley side it occupies lies in the sights of Yeovil's ever westward expansion. This excavation has demonstrated the potential of the badly damaged deserted medieval settlement and this will hopefully ensure that it will be suitably investigated should the land it occupies ever be developed.

Acknowledgements

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